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Over 77,000 Flee Fighting in DRC

¶1. (U) According to the GROC, there are now 77,488 displaced persons in camps spread along the Congo-Brazzaville bank of the Oubangui River, primarily in the Likouala region. Reports on both sides of the border indicate that what began as an ethnic conflict has now evolved into an organized rebellion against the government of the DRC. UNHCR Brazzaville reports that the militiamen have moved to within 60 kilometers of Gemena, DRC as part of an effort to consolidate and expand the area they control. As the geographic scope of the fighting has widened the flight across the Oubangui River into Congo-B has started anew. In the last two weeks, an additional 30,000 people have fled the violence in the Equateur Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo to Congo-Brazzaville. Unlike the group of displaced persons who fled to Congo-B in the first week of November, there have been no wounded in the latest group. According to UNHCR, these people are not fleeing attack; they are fleeing because they are afraid of being caught in the crossfire of the GDRC response to the rebellion. The total number of displaced is now over 77,000 and their camps extend over more than 500 kilometers from the town of Liranga at the confluence of the Oubangui and the Congo rivers all the way North up the Oubangui to the border with the Central African Republic. UNHCR Congo-B expects the number of displaced will grow as people continue to flee across the river to the relative safety of Congo-B.

12. (U) Despite concerted efforts by both the UN and the GROC to respond to this crisis, the situation in the Likouala region remains alarming. The UN has already dispatched nearly 1000 tons of food and non-food aid to the region and distribution is underway in the major camps. The UN and GROC are preparing a barge for shipment up the river with 15,000 liters of fuel and an additional 300 tons of food. These important contributions, however, will inevitably fall short of reaching the growing needs of a large displaced population in an insecure and isolated region. During a recent meeting with the Ambassador, the World Food Program representative reported that many children in the camps are sick with malnutrition because their only source of food has been crushed cassava leaves. Prior to the recent cross border movement, the population of the Likouala region is estimated to have been 67,000. The population has more than doubled, and the displaced now outnumber the native population. The UN reported that the GROC has considered measures to relocate some of the displaced back across the river to alleviate the stress on the native population of Likouala. Insecurity in the region further complicates the humanitarian response. Two DRC militiamen were recently arrested in the ROC with 1,200 liters of gas that they were trying to move across the river. UNHCR reports that three armed men presumably en route to the Equateur Province in the DRC were arrested in Impfondo, ROC on November 8. In addition, there have been several reports of violence and even kidnappings in the camps carried out by DRC militiamen who crossed into the ROC.

13. (U) Without a renewed commitment to meet the growing needs in the region, conditions will continue to worsen. The European Union is set to provide some two million Euros in additional aid via the World Food Program and UNHCR later this week. The Italian Embassy in Brazzaville has also recently contributed about 300,000 Euros in emergency aid. Efforts to find more

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lasting solutions, however, continue to be complicated by the lack of an official declaration of refugee status for the displaced. Without the official refugee declaration, UNHCR is somewhat constrained in what it can provide to the displaced. UNHCR continues to request that the GROC make the declaration, and reports that they expect to have a decision of refugee status before December 16. (Comment: There are reports that the GDRC is pressuring the GROC not to make the official declaration. Another possibility is that the GROC does not want to provide refugee status because it is concerned that this will encourage the displaced to stay in Congo-B. End comment.)

Chevron Uncovers Theft

14. (SBU) Chevron is currently caught in a legal dispute that is preventing several of its employees from leaving the country. In the process of preparing for the sale of a downstream asset, its retail gas stations that carry the Texaco logo, Chevron recently uncovered a theft of approximately \$10 million USD involving some of its own employees and those of French-owned bank BCI. Chevron turned the case over to the authorities, which launched an investigation that resulted in the arrest of several of Chevron's local employees. Meanwhile, a judge in Brazzaville launched a parallel investigation, which has resulted in the reported harassment of several Chevron employees. Chevron would like to send these employees out of the country, but the local authorities have thus far prevented them from leaving, citing the ongoing investigation. (Note: Some of these employees are expatriates, but none are American citizens. End note.) The Ambassador has been in frequent contact with the head of Chevron operations in Congo, and spoke with Minister of the Interior

Raymond Mboulou on December 9 to express concern about the treatment of Chevron employees and to request that the two investigations be reconciled. The Ambassador is currently seeking a meeting with the Minister of Justice.

HIPC Debt Relief May Come in January

15. (SBU) The visiting World Bank/IMF Highly-Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt relief team informed the Ambassador December 4 that Congo may achieve debt relief by January of 2010. There will be a debt relief board meeting to discuss Congo's case during the third week of January. The IMF team noted that the Congolese have made progress in all areas and said "it is a done deal." According to the team, the Congolese have made the recent progress in the commercialization of oil trading. At the request of the IMF/World Bank team, the Congolese will in January dissolve COTRADE (which was headed by President Sassou's son). The national oil company, SNPC, (not its subsidiary COTRADE) will now be responsible for oil trading on Congo's account, under newly-designed standardized commercial procedures for trading oil and using a new database to track trades. The government has also reportedly implemented a new accounting system for audits of the oil sector and should soon be finished with an audit of 2008 oil revenues. In other areas outside of the oil sector, the government has adopted a new procurement code, standard bidding documents, an operational procurement manual, and a training program. In the forestry sector, the government has proposed fiscal amendments that would return more revenue to local communities and would require a greater percentage of finished wood products as opposed to raw material.

16. (SBU) Comment: It was clear from this meeting that the IMF/World Bank officials want to finish this process now so that Congo may achieve debt relief. They appeared convinced that additional cooperation from the Congolese may not be forthcoming if the government does not achieve debt relief as a result of its efforts. The officials are aware that once debt relief comes there is significantly less incentive for the Congolese to follow through on these reforms. End comment.)

Bollere Assumes Control of Pointe Noire Container Port

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17. (SBU) During a visit to the port of Pointe Noire December 1-4, the U.S. Coast Guard had the opportunity to view the newly-privatized container port operated by the private French consortium the Bollere Group since December 1, 2009. Bollere has named the new container port "Congo Terminal" and has already put in place a computerized tracking system for all of the containers in the port. Next steps include deepening the port to 15 meters, adding 30 percent to the length of the existing dock so that four container ships may offload at once, and adding a jetty on the ocean side of the container port. Bollere sees Pointe Noire not only as a regional hub, but as the primary point of entry into Central Africa. By 2016 Bollere will take over the entire container port area, including land that is currently occupied by a flour mill that is owned and operated by the American company Seaboard, under the local name MINOCO (reftel). During separate conversations, both Bollere and the Port Director insisted that Seaboard must move the mill, claiming that the loss of operating space won't allow Bollere to

fully implement its plans for mechanized operation of the port. Bollore said it intends to erect fully automated cranes so that forklifts will no longer be required anywhere in the container port. For its part, Seaboard told the visiting team that it intends to request that the government provide a suitable alternative, such as a sizable tract of land adjacent to Total Oil's Djeno facility, so that it may tap into the natural gas lines in order to power the mill and an industrial-sized bakery. (Comment: Having just completed the privatization of the flour mill, Seaboard understandably feels that it has just purchased something that immediately lost much of its value. End comment.)

Sassou Launches Two Books, Prepares For Copenhagen

18. (U) President Sassou launched two new books this week, one on sustainable development and climate change ("L'Afrique, Enjeu de la Planete"), and another based on a parable 'the tree of the ancestors' ("Gondwana et l'arbre des Ancetres"). Fortunately neither of these books pretends to have a foreword written by Nelson Mandela, or anyone else. (Note: The scandal over Sassou's previous book "Straight Speaking for Africa" has largely passed, with a visit to Brazzaville by Tokyo Sexwale, who noted that some of the statements made in the foreword can be attributed to a speech Mandela made in Cape Town in 1996. However, the claim that Mandela actually wrote the foreword, or even endorsed it in advance, as stated on the book's cover, was not accurate. End note.) With the publication of these books, President Sassou appears to be vying to gain profile in advance of the climate change summit in Copenhagen later this month. According to the Foreign Ministry, Sassou will attend the climate change coordination meetings hosted by President Sarkozy in Paris before traveling to Copenhagen. Based on his public statements and comments by government officials, it is not clear what position Sassou will take on climate change in Copenhagen, beyond a general plea that countries in the Congo basin should be compensated for not cutting down tropical forests. Sassou may also highlight the land he has set aside for national parks over the years, and measures his government has put in place to track and control timber exports.

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